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ABSTRACT

The influence of maternal language use patterns on the use patterns of the child was investigated in a black, low-income mother-child pair over a 20-month period, beginning at the child's 11th month of age. Video recordings were made of the pair's interaction in an unstructured playroom setting approximately every four weeks. Child multi-word utterance types and maternal utterance types were analyzed using a speech act categorrization and classification procedure. Speech acts are identified primarily as what it is that a speaker wishes to communicate when she/he makes an utterance (a request, statement or objection). These speech acts were subsumed under two broader categories, pragmatic and mathetic speech functions. Two types of pragmatic function were identified: (1) a pragmatic function linked to the immediate context, in which the objective of interpersonal contact was to satisfy personal needs or desires; and (2) a pragmatic function conveying social information in which the objective of interpersonal contact appeared to be to increase the child's awareness of social information. The mathetic function is defined as language being used to learn more about one's world. Results indicated that the mother's use patterns did influence the direction of verbal interaction for the child, and that the mother expressed a preference for verbal interaction that was pragmatic in nature and conveyed social rather than referential information. (Author/SS)

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Early Language Use and the Black Child: A Speech Act Analysis of Mother-Child Inputs and Outputs[1]

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A considerable amount of research effort has been directed toward evaluating or describing the linguistic performance of black school children. These studies, generally comparing black and white children in mainstream settings, have emphasized grammatical differences which are used to explain the differences in levels of test performance for the two groups. In contrast, the present study proposes other linguistic factors which may contribute, and perhaps add a new perspective, to this group of findings; these factors derive from language use. As suggested by the research studies of Labov (1972, 1970) and of Bernstein (1972, 1970), the way in which language is used by members of different social class and ethnic groups may be a general source of the variation in their performance in mainstream settings.

The specific question addressed was: Does the language use patterns of the black mother influence the use patterns of the black child? While the interaction between the two use patterns was quite complex results indicated that (1) the mother's use patterns did influence the direction of verbal interaction for the child; and (2) the mother expressed a preference for verbal interaction that was pragmatic in nature and which conveyed social rather than referential information. Observations collected by Ward (1971), in an ethnographic study Them Children, provide some support for these findings.

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Ward observed mother-child interaction in seven lower-class black families from the rural South for a year and concluded that the black mothers studied generally did not converse with their small children about objects such as "trucks and trains." When these mothers did talk to their children they usually initiated and selected the topics in the conversations. The topics for Ward's mothers were similar to those of the mother in the present study: e.g., personal hygiene, appropriate behaviors and the performance of activities such as singing, dancing and nursery rhymes for adults. These data suggest that these mothers may be establishing for their children an implicit heirarchy of how language is used during interpersonal contact. Moreover, this heirarchy reflects the mother's objectives in language use, and hence, some of her values and expectations.

The mother and child observed in the present study were drawn from a predominantly black, low-income neighborhood in a borough of New York City. The pair was observed in an unstructured playroom setting approximately every four weeks over a 20-month period, beginning at the child's 11th month of age. Video-recordings were made of each session. The Mean Lengths of Utterance (MLU) and ages of the child for the present study are presented in Table 1. As shown, data were drawn from five tapes within the child's MLU period of 2.0 - 3.0, where her age ranged from 22 - 32 months.

The analysis of the mother-child pair linguistic interaction was approached from two levels. One level was Halliday's (1975) distinction of the macro-functions of language during the child's development of lexicon and grammar: i.e., the mathetic and pragmatic macro-functions of language. Halliday defined the mathetic function as language being

used to learn more about ones world; and the pragmatic function as language being employed to meet personal needs and to control and interact with others.

The second level of analysis was Dore's (1975) description of the "sub-functions" of language, better known as speech acts. Speech acts are identified primarily as what it is that a speaker wishes to communicate when s/he makes an utterance (e.g., a request, a statement or an objection). In addition to the speaker's communicative intent, Dore used contextual information and the effect of the utterance upon the listener to determine the type of speech act that an utterance fulfilled.

Child multi-word utterance types and maternal utterance types were analyzed using a modification of Dore's (1975) speech act categorization and classification procedures (c.f. Folger & Chapman, 1978). Ten main speech act categories for the mother and ten for the child were identified. Examples and definitions for each speech act category are presented in Table 2.

The proportional frequencies for mother and child speech acts are presented in Table 3, and the graphs in Figure 1 present those speech act categories with proportions greater than 10%. As it can be seen, there is no clear relationship for mother and child propositional speech acts. For instance, descriptions have the highest proportional frequency for the child while RQ Action have the highest for the mother. Looking at Organizational Devices, however, the child's use pattern does resemble the pattern of the mother. This finding may be due, in part, to the physical position of the mother and child within the playsetting--the child usually sat on the floor, while the mother insisted on sitting in a chair a short distance away. As a result, many speech acts were

explicitly directed toward the listener of the pair; and attention-focusers (such as "look mommy") solicited at least minimal involvement from the non-participant. Thus, these kinds of acts were necessary to cue the mother and the child to subsequent speech acts intended for them as well as to solicit attention. Organizational Devices were also used as responses to other speech acts.

These speech acts, originally described by Dore (1975), can be subsumed under the two broader categories proposed by Halliday (1975): that is, the pragmatic and mathetic speech functions. The data on speech acts which measured the frequency of the pragmatic and mathetic functions of the mother and child are presented in Table 4 and Figure 2. Because, as Halliday pointed out, both the mathetic and pragmatic functions can be satisfied by the same adult utterance, this kind of analysis was more difficult for the mother's speech. However, this approach seemed reasonable since the impact of maternal speech acts on the child are more easily measured than adult-to-adult interactions.

With this in mind, two types of pragmatic function were identified for mother-child interaction: (1) a pragmatic function linked to the immediate context, where the objective of interpersonal contact was to satisfy personal needs or desires (e.g., "gimme cup"); and (2) a pragmatic function conveying social information where the objective of interpersonal contact appeared to be to increase the child's awareness of social information, and the function was not necessarily tied to the immediate context. Table 5 presents examples of mother and child speech acts which conveyed social information.

Looking at the graph for the mathetic function in Figure 2, we can see that there is little relationship between mother and child use patterns which would reflect a mathetic bias for the mother. The mother's use pattern does not indicate a preference for emphasizing language as a tool for learning about objects, actions and events in the referential sense--at least not for the period in question. Again, Ward's observations provide support for this finding.

When juxtaposed with the pragmatic data, we see that there is an interactive function for mother and child use patterns for both types of pragmatic function. The downward trend in the pragmatic use patterns was somewhat anticipated since the maturing child becomes more proficient within familiar settings; reciprocal maternal speech acts decreased as well as maternal speech acts which guided the child in routine, ongoing manipulations.

The proportions for speech acts which were pragmatic and conveyed social information are, in my view, the most interesting. There is a general upward trend in the relationship between mother and child use patterns, until Time IV where the child's proportion of pragmatic speech acts conveying social information are greater than that of the mother.

This research suggests that (1) this black child was learning at a very early stage in her language development that speech transmitting social information is highly valued; (2) the responses of this black mother tended to be more supportive of the child's pragmatic efforts; and (3) these language use patterns represent differences in preferences for communicative transactions which may be more important than what the differences in language and cognition may imply.

While observational evidence on black mother-child interaction has been cited as support for these findings, ethnic or social class inferences would be premature. Further observational investigations of children from various social class and ethnic backgrounds are needed. But, if use patterns are found to be culturally-specific, an analysis of how use patterns relate to the semantic-syntactic features of the language of the black child should prove meaningful.

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Early Language Use and the Black Child: A Speech Act Analysis of Mother-Child Inputs and Outputs.

Subjects: Mother-child pair from low-income borough of New York City

Table 1. MLUs and Age in Months for Child.

TIME	MLU	Age
I	1.98	22 mos
II	2.23	24 mos
III	2.39	26 mos
IV	2.50	28 mos
V	2.64	32 mos

Table 2. Definitions* and Examples for Main Speech Act Categories.

Descriptions: reports on actions, locations or events; and categorical naming of objects and persons.

CI (looking at horse) dis dog/
CXX (standing horse on floor) dis horsie standin' up/

Requests for Action: solicits listener to perform an action for speaker.

CII (looking at mother) push it mommy/

CIV (motioning mother to come down to floor) mommy want you over here/

Requests for Information: solicits listener to give information desired by speaker.

CIII (holding pillowcase up) dis a sheet./

CV (looking a mother after she removed lid from cup) did she popped it?/

Organizational Devices: non-propositional acts which initiate or maintain interpersonal contact.

CIV (holdin toy up to mother) look sis/

CV (responding to mother's RQ Info) oh tha's dirt/

Statements: facts, personal judgments, rules or procedural information.

CIV (holding horse and doll face-to-face) she like you/

CIV (mother offers aid) no wan help you/

Imitations: repeat part or all of prior speaker's utterance.
Protest: objects to action performed by other.

CII (mother writing on own shoe) don't write/ don't write T/

*Derived from Dore (1975).

Table 2 cont.

Performance Play: riddles, songs, etc.

RQ Permission: seeks permission to do an action.

CV (holding bolt over screw, looking at mother) now me put this on./

Other: sounds with communicative value but difficult to classify sometimes.

(in mother's speech) mhmm; uh-uh.

Ambiguous: intelligible utterance where intent was unclear.

CII (discussing animal cookies) what a cookie/

Table 3. Proportions for Different Speech Acts Within Child Multiword Utterance Types and Maternal Utterance Types.

	CHILD						MOTHER				
	I	II	III	IV	V		I	II	III	IV	V
Description	.34	.42	.38	.41	.49	Description	.18	.23	.11	.23	.21
RQ Action	.26	.16	.16	.12	.08	RQ Action	.28	.38	.16	.30	.30
RQ Info	.16	.09	.19	.18	.11	RQ Info	.13	.17	.20	.12	.29
Organ Device	.13	.10	.19	.12	.07	Organ Device	.17	.10	.23	.12	.08
Statement	.10	.20	.18	.18	.23	Statement	.20	.17	.27	.27	.21
Imitation	.07	.09	.04	.04	.07	Imitation	.01	--	.02	.02	.02
Protest	.04	.02	.05	*	--	Protest	.07	.04	.07	.01	*
Perf Play	.02	.03	--	.02	.02	Perf Play	.03	.04	--	--	*
RO Perm	--	--	--	.02	.01	RQ Perm	--	.03	--	.01	.01
Ambiguous	.02	--	--	--	--	Other	.02	.02	.02	.04	--

Note: Columns do not sum to 1.00 due to some double-coding.
* less than .01.

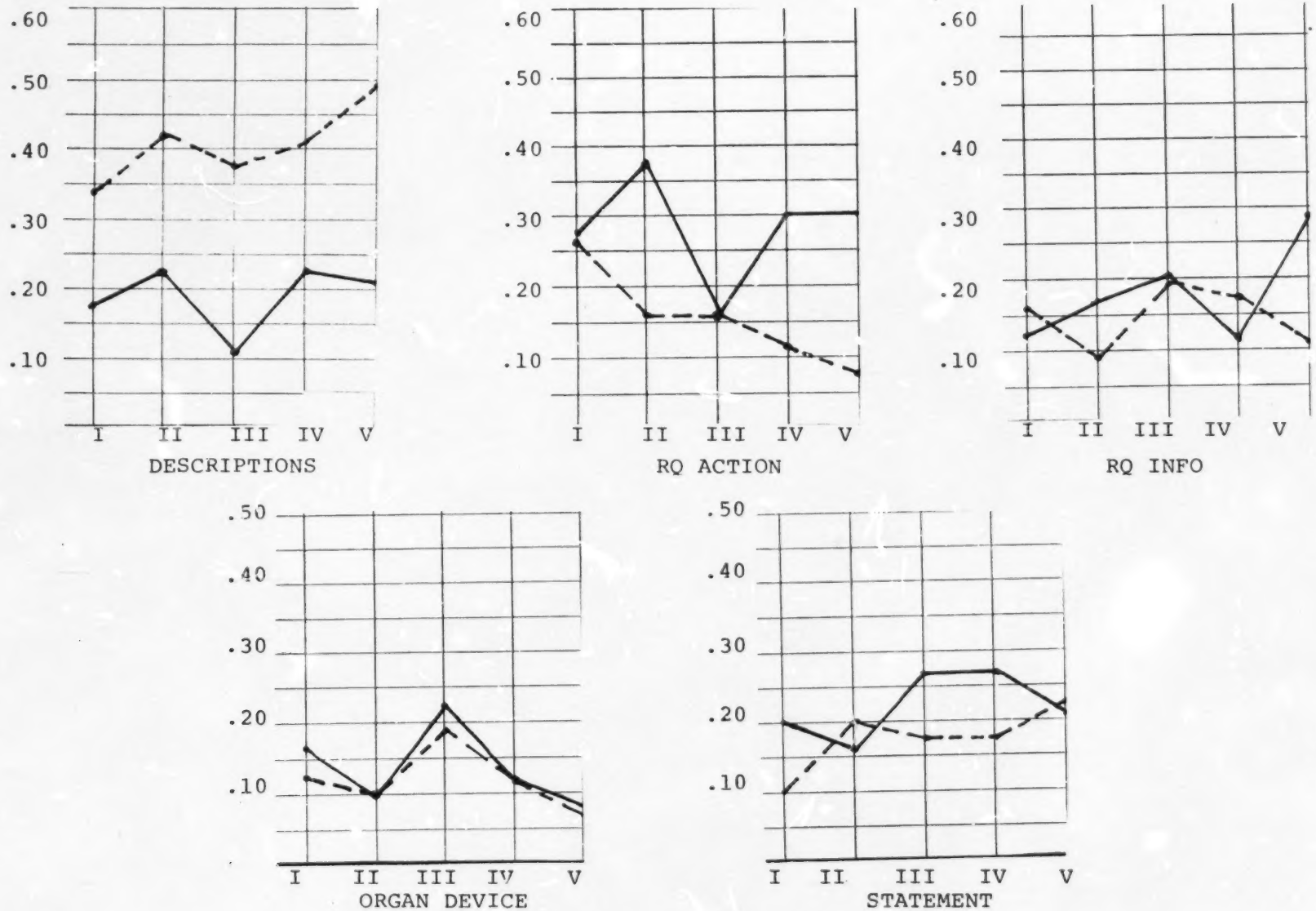

Figure 1. Proportions for Different Speech Acts Within Child Multiword Utterance Types and Maternal Utterance Types.

---- Child
____ Mother

Table 4. Proportions for Speech Acts Serving Mathetic and Pragmatic Functions.

	CHILD						MOTHER				
	I	II	III	IV	V		I	II	III	IV	V
Mathetic	.54	.46	.53	.42	.41	Mathetic	.22	.30	.30	.38	.36
Pragmatic	.34	.45	.30	.40	.13	Pragmatic	.57	.63	.34	.48	.47
Pragmatic Conveying Social Info	.24	.19	.35	.27	.52	Pragmatic Conveying Social Info	.28	.26	.46	.27	.30

Note: Columns do not sum to 1.00 due to some double-coding.

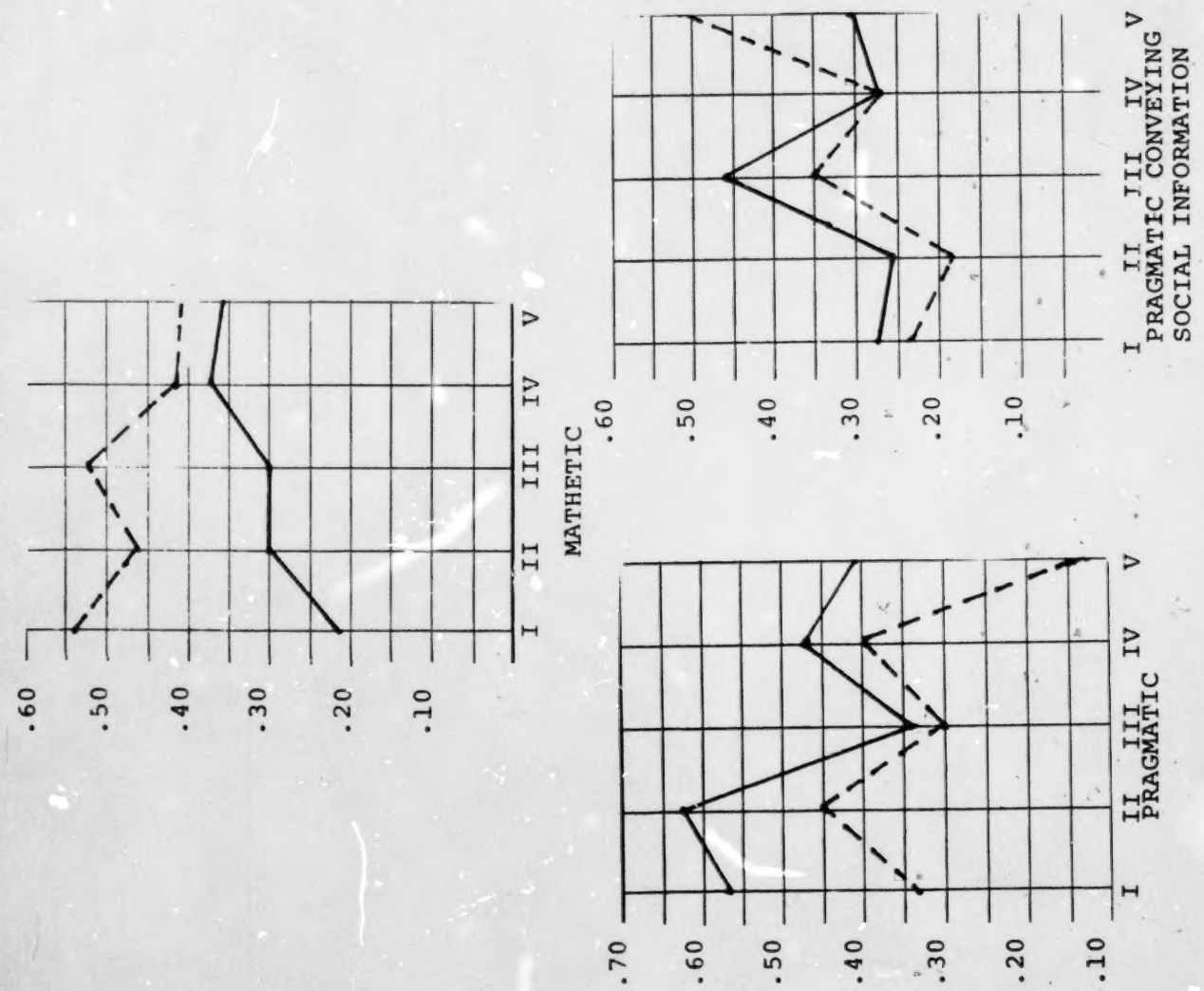

Figure 2. Proportions for Speech Acts Serving Mathetic and Pragmatic Functions.

----Child
____Mother

Table 5. Examples of Speech Acts Conveying Social Information.

MXII	(child carries doll to big slide...puts doll on top, lets go and doll tumbles down slide and lands on floor)	
		M: Oops!/ She's hurt/
	(child looks at mother) C: she hurt↑/	
		M: She's hurt/ Pick her up/
	(child looks at doll, but remains where is)	
		M: Go get her/
	(child looks at mother)	
	(child climbs onto slide)	M: Now how would you like it if I did that to you?/
		M: You're gonna fall on—/ T, you're gonna hurt her!/
	(child pauses, looks at doll; extends leg down toward doll; begins to slip and pulls away)	
		M: You're gonna hurt her/ Go pick her up/
	(child looks at doll) C: did hurt you↑/	
	(child looks at mother) C: did I hurt you?/	
		M: You already hurt her/ You ain't talking to me/ You ain't hurt me/
	(with some difficulty, climbs down from slide)	
		M: Pick up the baby/
	(walking to baby) C: hurt baby↑/	
	(taking baby into hands) C: ya hurt baby↑/	

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MXIV (child picks up wooden ball from tray)

M: Wanna play "Open, Shut Them" for I?/

(child looks at I)

M: Huh?/

(child looks at mother)
C: no/

M: 'Scuse me/

(looking for 3rd wooden ball)
C: shut up/

(child picks up ball from floor)

M: You better stop saying that/

(putting ball into slot on hammer & ball toy)
C: no momma/

M: You s'pose to say, 'hush'/

(child removes hand; looking at camera)
C: hush/=

(looking at mother)
C: hush/=

##

MXX

(child pretending to wash nude doll)
C: here sissy/washin' up/

M: You wash her cooty-cat good?/

C: no/

M: You gotta wash it good/So the fish don't come get it/

M: What you washin' now?/

C: wash back/

M: Make sure you wash her butt/

##

MXX (child looking at I)
C: dat-dat was de dirt
out-out-outside/

I: What was outside?/

C: de dirt/

I: The dirt↑/=
Oh:/

I: Oh:/ What kind of
dirt was it?/

C: I can't eat dat dirt/
its nasty dirt/

I: Oh:/

M: Why would you want
to eat the dirt?/

(looking at mother)
C: I 'on wanna eat dat dirt/

M: You don' have to
eat it/

C: I-I s'pose to eat de ice/

M: Yeah/ You s'pose
to eat the ice,
but not the dirt/

I: Oh/

C: Oh/=
not dirt/=

M: No/

C: de dog can eat de dirt↑/

M: Yeap/

C: is he s'pose to eat de dirt?/

M: mmhmm/

C: dat dog does not s'pose
to eat de dirt↑/

M: What dog?/

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